

Objectification as a Device in the Films of Godard and Breillat: *Alphaville* (1965) and
Romance (1999)

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“In order to live in a society in Paris today, on no matter what level, one is forced to prostitute oneself in one way or another—or to put it another way, to live under conditions resembling those of prostitution [...] in a modern society, prostitution is the norm.” – Jean-Luc Godard (Le Nouvel Observateur 1966)

“It seems to me that in Paris today, we are all living more or less in a state of prostitution. The increase in prostitution, literally speaking, is partial proof of this statement because it calls into question the body, but one can prostitute oneself just as equally with the mind, the spirit. I think it is a collective phenomenon, and perhaps one which is not altogether new. But what is new is that people find it normal.” – Godard (qtd. in Roud 34)

Film criticism’s grasp is often limited by the enumeration of the characteristics of a director’s work, which wrongfully implies that each characteristic is a fairly autonomous and separate concern. One of the oft cited preoccupations in Godard’s cinema is prostitution as a social metaphor. However, his use of prostitution as a *trope* for the state of existence in modern society is closely related to another of these supposedly separate concerns: language. In fact, if one were to take these two concepts as separate ideas, one may find that the focus on language overshadows that of the tropological commodification of the body. I do not. An investigation into the whole of his cinema reveals that these two overriding concerns are both part of a much larger matter, the use of and interest in objectification as a cinematic device.

The Nouvelle Vague maintains an extraordinary influence on film in terms of its conceptualization, production, and criticism. Yet the French New Wave's influence expands well beyond cinema to include the larger idea of society, under which fall economic concerns of commodity and consumerism, popular culture, and the representation of the self. Looking at the New Wave through this lens, its most innovative member is Jean-Luc Godard.

There are two interrelated considerations one must take in an examination of his work. First is the interrogation and representation of the real in cinema through both language and the image—in Godard they are never independent of each other and always felt in the same breath, in the same frame. Second is the representation and criticism of modern society and the nature of being part of that society. Like so many aspects of Godard, these two considerations can never be separated from each other for in his cinema any formulation of cinematic language is an ethical choice.

As Godard is considered such an immense figure in film and in film criticism, it is not just useful but necessary to weigh his influence by examining an equally innovative personality in French cinema who is not merely informed by Godard's ideas but in some ways provides a counterpoint to them. The controversial director Catherine Breillat serves as the perfect reverse-shot. At the heart of Godard's and Breillat's methods is the use of criticism, cinematic and social, through filmmaking, and at the center of their criticism is the use of objectification as a tool for commentary.

The word "objectification" is, admittedly, quite the broad term. The meaning that first comes to mind is the sexual commodification of the body that is most frequently associated with women. This is the common sense of the term "prostitution," the buying

and selling of a woman's body as a sexual object. It is also the simplification of the abstract, the taking of something vague, resistant to definition, and the rendering of it into something more concrete. This is easily construed as the goal of filmmaking in general. A director begins with an idea of a potential film—its characters, setting, story, and purpose—and combines these elements through script writing and finally through the production of a film in order to create something more tangible. Objectification can also be taken as the use of distancing, the alienation of the spectator from the film that results in reminding the spectator that one is watching a staged performance. Distancing transforms a transparent film that would otherwise appear realistic into a work that draws attention to the fact that it is not at all a presentation of reality but rather a construction of reality, a representation. Lastly, the most important type of objectification to our discourse is that of the individual who must reify themselves on a social level, through one's occupation and behavior in order to be part of a larger society. This is the basic sense behind what will be continually referred to as the *prostitution metaphor*.

As already emphasized, Breillat is not just another filmmaker influenced by Godardian cinema, but rather she is a counterpoint to it. An inquiry into Godard will undoubtedly bring about social questions; however, he represents a questioning of cinema itself, rendering any reading meta-cinematic first and social second. The interpretation of his films requires an investigation into the use of language and image to construct the lens through which social commentary becomes evident. Breillat differs from Godard in that the spectator finds her cinema largely social and then meta-cinematic—if at all. The question here is the image and how it relates to society and not entirely the relationship

between the camera and the image. The meta-cinematic in Breillat, where it exists, is approachable only after an understanding of the social is acquired. Thus the critical undertaking of one director must be the inverse of the other.

The ordering of subjects in the criticism of the two directors may seem arbitrary, but it is important because it is through such prioritizing that we can see the differences between the tones of each of their cinemas. The organization is essential to understanding the spectator's experience while viewing a Godard film versus a Breillat film. The sum of the components of Breillat's cinema constructs not just an inquiry but an aggressive challenging of the image in the social context, whereas Godard is relatively passive in this regard. In the shadow of the monolithic stature of Godard, Breillat filters his influence to create a unique approach, all the while remaining loyal to the use of objectification to represent and criticize the social and, at times, the cinematic.

To demonstrate Godard and Breillat's particular uses of objectification to represent and criticize the social and cinematic, our discussion will focus on one film from each filmmaker: Godard's *Alphaville* (1965) and Breillat's *Romance* (1999). The first is a film noir in which a detective is sent from "the Outlands" to corrupt a future Paris dominated by technology and a particular mode of thought dictated by a supercomputer named Alpha 60 that outlaws all concepts and emotions deemed illogical. Due to this interdiction of the illogical, the semiotic chain of signifiers is truncated to its bare essentials, simplifying those words that can be defined for ostensive purposes. Therefore, the story, its characters, and the work itself are objectified in that the abstract is made concrete. Breillat's *Romance* is a controversial and brutal film dealing directly with heterosexual relationships by focusing on a particular woman attempting to define her

independence from her lover through a sadomasochistic relationship with another man and finally through the birth of her child. In this piece, men and women are both reduced to objects by way of cinematic and narrative language, defying established representations of men and women to arrive at a feminist commentary. Both films, although reaching different conclusions through contrasting plots, nonetheless exhibit acutely similar symptoms due to their use of objectification as a device.

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Before delving headlong into Godard's ciné-politics/philosophy, I would like to relate a few lines of anecdote concerning his life during World War Two, one that long predates his film career but is essential to its development. In the excellent biography by Colin MacCabe, there is an account of a young Jean-Luc who spent a good portion of the war in Swiss cinemas viewing newsreels and unknowingly developing one of the strongest bases for his approach to filmmaking. Switzerland was at that time one of the only European nations that had access to both Axis and Allied news footage. These hours were spent in a dark room viewing documentaries of the war through the perspective of the Allies and then through an Axis perspective. It is thus, one could say, that he gleaned his view of cinematic reality, one that could show the same exact footage but with a different soundtrack or perhaps different footage of the same battle with varying accounts. It is a time that, as we shall see, informed his appropriation of Bazinian criticism, his own meta-filmmaking, and the new language that his films would invent.

Before any of the *Cahiers du cinéma* directors (Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer, Rivette, and Chabrol) completed their first feature film, André Bazin occupied the place of a father figure in their cinema education and was the founder of *Cahiers du cinéma*. A

critic unsurpassed in his influence on film, one of the major tenets of his legacy is the responsibility of cinema to capture the real. Film differs from all other arts in that it not only captures everything as an image—photography does this as well—but everything as a moving image. Therefore the best way to utilize this ability, according to Bazin, is through the sequence shot (MacCabe 77).

Godard differs from Bazin in one very crucial way. In his early critical writings he includes the presence of the camera in his view of *cinematic* reality. Because of the camera, cinema is not simply representing reality but through the act of representation it is reality itself—at the same time that the camera represents a reality, it becomes part of that reality (MacCabe 72). In contrast to the reality of Bazin's sequence shot, one that is allegedly untouched by editing, Godard posits that any positioning of the camera is already a form of editing—the real is grasped but altered by the camera. The cineaste, if he is to aspire to the real, is to choose the best position from which the camera can “capture” the real. Also, since editing is inherent in any use of the camera, the juxtaposition of images, the shot reverse-shot, are as central to cinematic reality as camera placement, if not more so. In his 1956 article “Montage my fine care,” Godard states: “If directing is a look montage is a heartbeat. To foresee is the characteristic of both: but what one seeks to foresee in space, the other seeks in time” (Godard 39). Reality as Bazin imagined it does not exist in the Godard film. As MacCabe phrases it: “for Godard, there is not reality and then the camera—there is reality seized at this moment and in this way by the camera” (79).

This particular interpretation of the real in cinema has major consequences in the reading of any one of his works. The first question the spectator must pose is, “where

does reality sit in his art if it exists at all?” or perhaps if one prefers pre-made categories: “is he of the Lumières’ documentary school or the Méliès’ fantasy camp?” The division between documentary and fiction is an interest throughout his career, one directly addressed in *La Chinoise* (1968) when one of the Maoist students, played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, contends that the Lumière brothers actually created fiction, happenings that were premeditated, whereas Méliès captured things that occurred in earnest before the camera and even events that would come to pass in the future. In the first book exclusively dedicated to Godard, Richard Roud asks, “If God (or Henri Langois) could edit Lumière and Méliès together, mightn’t he get something like Godard?” (Roud 99). Yet Roud confuses the documentary/fiction duality by taking them to be separate and independent cinematic features.

Godard combines these two perspectives in a unique and groundbreaking way that prevents the spectator from forgetting that one is watching a fictional film. Perez argues that in a Godard film, film is a fiction that appropriates the signifier as an illusory signified (64). Documentary is a form of representation—photographically, in terms of light, shape, and movement it is a signifier—extended to fiction in his cinema. Accordingly, fiction filmmaking is actually a documentary of that fiction being created before the camera; hence, he “induce[s] a break between signifier and signified—between the means of representation and expression and the things being represented and expressed” (68). A dialectic is therefore set up between documentary and fiction. For example, characters gaze frequently at the camera without a counter shot, which would usually show the object of their regard, and at times even address the camera, referring to its presence. By doing so, the (illusion of) fiction is broken and the spectator sees Eddie

Constantine as Lemmy Caution, Anna Karina as Natasha von Braun or Odile Monod, Sami Frey as Franz, etc. Godardian characters draw attention to the very fact that they are actors playing a role—his actors signify not the character that they are assuming so much as the act of acting (63). In this light, the advertising campaign for *Vivre sa vie* (1962) becomes very fascinating. The film's posters declare that Nana "gives her body but keeps her soul." To tie this into our focus on objectification, Perez asserts that "both acting and prostitution are occupations that deal in the body" (72). By underlining the documentary presence of the actor who lends his/her own body to a fictional persona, the actors of a Godard film objectify themselves by emphasizing that they are a documentary signifier in the place of a fictional signified. The effect that this has on the spectator is great. Such a use of the meta-cinematic places a distance between the viewer and the film, a technique called distanciation or the "alienation effect"—appropriated by Godard to film from Louis Althusser and Bertolt Brecht. The blurring of actor/character can easily be extended to the film itself because any break between the illusory reality of a film and the viewing of it on the part of the spectator underlines the overall fiction as such and then becomes a documentary of that fiction being made.

The power representation and editing hold in Godard is so central to his form of cinema that one could easily contend that "editing is the reading moment" (Andrews 1), or more precisely—to tailor this motto of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school of poetry to film—"editing is the viewing moment," or even "the use of (cinematic) language is the viewing moment, the moment that a reality is understood by the spectator." The accent on use and editing becomes increasingly appropriate when one examines the debt Godard owes to Ludwig Wittgenstein (a man to whom the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets are also

indebted). The Godardian take on the real contributes to a new form of cinema built upon the foundation of a new cinematic language very similar to the philosophy of Wittgenstein, a point of reference all too insightful as the relationship between language and the prostitution metaphor becomes massively important in *Alphaville*.

In his classic *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein claims, “*essence* is expressed in grammar” (371). These five words could easily be used to describe Godard’s cinematic language (he is fond of calling the shot reverse-shot the element most central to cinematic grammar). Essence on the other hand could very well be understood as meaning, as that reality one assumes, through the act of communication, to be behind each word. The illusory essence of words—implied through the use of italics—leads to one of Wittgenstein’s major points in his work. If the essence of a word does not exist per se, then the appearance of meaning is found in the language and more precisely in the way it is used in the language, for the word cannot exist on its own in these conditions: “Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life?—In its use it is *alive*. Is life breathed into it there?—Or is the *use* its life?” (432). This “life” Wittgenstein speaks of is its meaning, the characteristic it attains by appearing to exist in reality. Therefore:

For a *large* class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

And the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer* (43).

If a word’s meaning is its use in the language, then the portrayal of the real in cinema is actually how it is used in the cinematic language, editing. Also, in order to see the use of

it, to be aware of its editing, one must be aware of the camera, the actors, the filmmaker, the scenario, the lighting etc. In general, one must be aware of what/who is using the cinematic language, cognizant of these “bearers” who edit through the very use of language.

This notion is extremely important to Godard’s use of distancing. Susan Sontag calls Godard a “destroyer of cinema” (150), but in fact to destroy in his cinema is also to create: “To imagine a language means to imagine a life-form” (Wittgenstein 19). To innovate something is to destroy its predecessor, and to destroy implies the act of criticizing. Godard’s aim to create or to innovate a new form of cinema is, then, at once to criticize previous cinematic languages as well as the various subjects that his new form may tackle, subjects that those earlier forms might have already addressed. Sontag’s singular article addresses this feature on many different planes, creating a veritable list of ways in which criticism is made available by making the film apparent itself, by pointing to the bearer of language, by making it “impossible ever to penetrate behind the veil of cinema unmediated by cinema” (170):

1. The “literary” film - Usually meant to underline a preoccupation with ideas at the detriment of the work as a whole, Godard uses citations to examine the relationships between literature and cinema and to expound upon these ideas (153-55). Citations also serve to disrupt the flow of the film, to fragment, to break the transmission of an illusory real in order comment on the action (167).
2. “Hybridization” – The equilibrium of apparently contradictory elements, seamless fragmentation (151).

3. The use of defined genres (i.e. science fiction and film noir) – Sontag quotes Godard as saying: “I prefer to use a kind of tapestry, a background on which I can embroider my own ideas. But I generally do need a story. A conventional one serves well, perhaps even best” (159). Godard chooses a basic plot, one objectified to its basic elements, as the best way to make apparent his own presence.
4. A shifting of point of view – Often, one cannot determine who the first person narrator is in his films (i.e. *Alpha 60* or *Lemmy Caution*—both have voiceovers in *Alphaville*). The blurring together of first and third person leads to the construction of a new point of view, a new narrative voice, the “narrative presence” of Godard himself (170).¹

All the above are yet further examples of the creation of a new cinematic language, one that consumes itself, “a cinema that eats cinema” (171), and one that instead of having an impenetrable veil lifts the painted veil to make apparent its own components. Yet, the language and its bearer who, through destruction, creates in order to criticize enables one more crucial possibility not touched upon by Sontag: the chance of criticism on the part of the spectator.

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Alphaville, a film grounded in fantasy, a genuine dystopia, does not initially appear as the most suitable work to elaborate Godard’s use of language and depiction of social objectification. *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (1966) or even *Masculin féminin* (1966) seem much more appropriate, the first a journey into the daily life of a prostitute

¹ Sontag’s use of “point of view” may not be all that accurate as the camera tends to identify with a number of characters through the course of a film. It would be better to use, as implied, the term “narrative voice” or “narrative authority.”

living the in the wastelands of the Parisian banlieue, and the second even more concerned with what it is to come of age in the modernization of the 1960s in that same metropolis. Despite *Alphaville*'s faults and more accurately because of them, it serves best to clearly illustrate the ideas that both *Maculin/feminin* and *Deux ou trois choses...* undertake. This often overlooked and unjustly underrated work is among the most representative and by far the most effective of his films to deal with the concepts of language in both the meta-cinematic and the social realms. It is a film that reflects its subject so well that it becomes difficult to draw the boundary between the cinematic and the meta-cinematic—*Alphaville* is “the effort to purify language of philosophical and cultural dissociation” both in its plot and in the film medium itself (Sontag 188). Via the subject of language, it also explores Godard's related pet-topic, the prostitution metaphor. Indeed it fuses them so that they are one and the same: “Language is the widest context in which Godard's recurrent them of prostitution must be located. Beyond its direct sociological interest for Godard, prostitution is an extended metaphor for the fate of language, that is, of consciousness itself” (188). It is this unmistakable union between language and objectification, film and film subject that renders this seemingly light venture into genre film a piece so fecund for critical digging.

Of course, the most obvious instances of objectification in *Alphaville* are directly linked with the traditional meaning of prostitution. The first genuine prostitute is Béatrice, the “blonde avec les longues jambes,” who shows Lemmy Caution to his room and defines herself as a “séductrice d'ordre trois.” As if this weren't enough, she sports a sort of barcode, a number, a feature shared by all women in the film (we never know if any of the men have similar tattoos). She recites lines automatically, answers questions

never asked, and undresses without being requested to do so. It is simply her occupation, just as it is for many other women in Alphaville. Midway into the film, we meet another séductrice who is her mirror image, although it may be more precise to say that she is a negative image of Béatrice: she is a brunette, this time with a white dress instead of one that is brown, and through the long corridors of the hotel she walks on Lemmy's right side instead of his left. She is an anonymous woman, similar to the séductrice who propositions Lemmy's colleague, Henri Dickson, yet Dickson's girl goes by any number of names, from "Marie Antoinette" to "Madame Bovary."

Examples of objectified women abound in this "putain de villes" as Lemmy fittingly calls it—they stand motionless on desks, pose naked save for a pair of heels in glass boxes, and when not prostituting themselves or posing for men they are objects that participate in the murderous ballet of synchronized swimming. These women are part of a long line in Godard's filmography (*Vivre sa vie*, *Deux ou trois choses...*, *Le mépris* [1963], *Une femme mariée* [1964]), the most explicit samples of the metaphor he employs to comment on modern existence. Of Macha Méril in *Une femme mariée* Godard states that she is "in fact already an inhabitant of Alphaville—woman relegated to object by the pressures of modern life, incapable of being herself" (qtd. in Roud 31)

The second opening quote indicates that Godard finds that this state of existence is not entirely new but new in that it is widely considered normal. In his films, 1960s Paris is representative of many shifts in twentieth century society, one of which is architectural. The decade, as witnessed by Godard, is characterized by the drastic change of Hausmann's Paris into a vast urban center characterized by the International style of the twenties and thirties, buildings fashioned after the Bauhaus school and Mies van der

Rohe's designs, a change exemplified in the later construction of low-income housing developments. The HLMs (Habitations à loyer modéré) were part of a grand urbanization project that inspired a fear of modernization and of a perceived dehumanization that would likely follow—Lemmy refers to them as “Hôpitals de la longue maladie” (Darke 12). The economic conditions present among the individuals who lived in these buildings often forced women into lives of prostitution, to take any action that would help them manage. The Postwar period—extended in Godard to include the sixties—could conversely be described as the first time in any capitalist society when the securing of a job was more or less guaranteed to the privileged youth. The question occidental young adults then posed to themselves was not about finding a vocation but about how to live in society without being detached from *humanity*, without being objectified to fit into predetermined roles (MacCabe 190). The sentiment of reification felt by the privileged youth and the need to objectify oneself to simply get by felt by the underprivileged French classes reinforce Godard's notion that it is not a completely new idea but new in that it is the norm. *Alphaville* is the cinematic embodiment of a time anxious at the thought of “post-nuclear traumatized future societies whose inhabitants have been reduced to slave-like status” (Hilliker 4). At one point, Lemmy Caution and Henri Dickson compare Alphaville's citizenry to an ant colony where everyone not just plays a role but is defined by that role, a colony that, according to Dickson, also once had writers, painters, and artists.

In *Deux ou trois choses...* Marina Vlady/ Juliette Janson defines language for her son as “la maison dans laquelle l'homme habite.”² Later, in that same film, Godard says in voiceover, “[...] dire que les limites du langage sont celles du monde, dire que les limites

² “The house in which man lives” (all translations, unless otherwise indicated are my own)

de mon langage sont celles du monde, et qu'en parlant, je limite le monde, je le termine.

³ The same attitude toward language is evident in every one of his films, and in fact one of the central characters in *Alphaville*, Alpha 60, could have just as easily said the same thing. It is through these concepts, most certainly influenced by Wittgenstein's ideas of the "use" of language, that Alpha 60 constructs its technocracy and objectifies not just Alphaville's citizens but language itself. In the most informative sequence of the film, Alpha 60's lecture at the "Institut des sémantiques général," the supercomputer explains its program and its reasons: "Il n'y a que la present; personne n'a vécu dans le passé; personne ne vivra dans le future."⁴ Alpha 60 then clarifies this statement (here paraphrased):

Time is like a circle. The arc that descends is the past and the rising arc is the future. Everything has been said—at least as long as words do not change their meanings and meanings their words.

It is an interesting notion, although not entirely true, at least not without Alpha 60.

This particular portion of the lecture is accompanied by the image of a man and a woman, one with the word "oui" replacing her eyes and "non" replacing the eyes of the other. Next, one sees two images of a teeter-totter, an exclamation point at one end and a question mark on the other, quickly replaced with the opposition of the words "pourquoi" and "parce que." The next projected drawing is of the universal abbreviation "S.O.S." lost in a series of waves, followed by the image of "Au secours" falling from the sky. The visual juxtaposition of words and their opposites or the image of a word completely detached from logical signification are shown at the same time that Alpha 60 speaks,

³ "[...] to say that the limits of language are those of the world, to say that the limits of my language are those of the world, and that in speaking, I limit the world, I finish it"

⁴ "There is only the present; no one has lived in the past; no one will live in the future"

therefore highlighting what it believes are various visualizations of the problem of language: words do in fact change their meanings and meanings their words. This is precisely the problem that Alpha 60 seeks to rectify. After the above images, a list of words is projected on the screen, all of which are written in a manner that reflects their immediate signifieds: “esclal^{ier},” “vvvvagues,” “cen uré,” and finally “αville.” This is merely a visual example of what Alpha 60 wishes to accomplish, the endless timeline where the connection between signifier and signified is made into a circle, where there exists nothing but the present. The only word that is not altered in the list is “imbroglio,” emphasizing the position that the dilemma of language is inherent in language itself, “Ce sont les actes des hommes à travers les siècles passés qui, peu à peu, vont les détruire. Moi Alpha 60, je ne suis que la moyenne logique de cette destruction.”⁵ In gaining control of the use of language, by rendering time a circle, a never-ending present, Alpha 60 thus gains control of its citizens and mediates the destruction of language neither to preserve it nor to save those who use it but to build a new language and a new type of user. By simplifying the process of signification, Alpha 60 simplifies the house man lives in, its language, and objectifies man as well. A few results of this particular program are Alphaville’s Bible, a dictionary where words that are difficult to simplify are excluded (i.e. “l’amour,” “la conscience,” “la tendresse”), and its inhabitants who are automatons, mere bodies filling basic vocations. At the end of the lecture, Natasha explains to Lemmy that “la vie et la mort sont à l’intérieur du même cercle.” Alphaville is an attempt at the objectification of language, therefore of humanity, so that complex meanings can be contained in a sort of ever-present tense, an indestructible, self-sufficient structure, a

⁵ “It is the acts of men across past centuries that, little by little, are going to destroy them. I, Alpha 60, am only the logical means of this destruction.”

circle. Consequently, it is no mistake that Alpha 60 is always represented in circular form, be it a light, a ventilator, or a projector (Silverman 68).

The film begins with the computer's voiceover coupled by a flashing light that is not entirely dissimilar to the light of a film projector, not only designating the following fiction as such but also pointing to an odd type of alliance between the film and Alpha 60. Certainly the cinematography, intertextuality, self-referentiality, and the acting are all forms of objectification analogous to Alpha 60's program in that they contribute to the distancing effect, the rendering of the film itself an object. The bleakness of the film, its accentuation of the film noir style is in partnership with the cold, dim nature of Alphaville's mission statement. Lemmy is introduced to the spectator decapitated by darkness, only a body. The introductory shards of music limit the spectator's tendency to lose oneself in the fiction.

The intertextuality and acting style of the film both serve a similar purpose. Throughout the movie, we hear and see references to literary and cinematic works whose function is partially to emphasize the film's fictional status: *Capitale de la douleur* by Paul Éluard, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* by Céline, Carné's *Le jour se lève*, the pulp fiction/film noir classic *The Big Sleep*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, all of which draw attention to the film's own status as a fiction. To use a precise example of the objectifying elements of Godard's actors, Anna Karina represents what he calls a "home movie" style, "a star and critique of stardom" (77). She is not an actor who simply plays a role but who plays a role that signifies the act of playing that role; she is a reified actor. Godard has said of his then wife that she "had a great deal in common with the actors of the silent period. She acted with her whole being and not at all in a psychological

manner” (MacCabe168). During her first meeting with Lemmy, she continuously addresses the camera, as does Lemmy on several occasions. At the beginning of the conversation about the execution spectacle, the camera starts at an angle to Karina/Natasha’s gaze and then moves directly before her, in close-up, so that it becomes the object of her gaze, so that she speaks directly to the spectator. In the reverse-shot, Lemmy does likewise, followed by another shot of Karina speaking to the camera/spectator. This emphasizes their roles as actors in the film, not characters, and hence the film as a fiction portrayed through documentary. On the other hand, the above examples of cinematic and meta-cinematic objectification are not as straightforward as they might seem; if truth be told, they could also be seen in opposition to Alpha 60’s program.

The intertextuality, the documentary aspects, genre status, acting style, personas, and cinematic and sound components complicate Alpha 60’s objectifying agenda. The citations of Éluard and Céline⁶ are both subversive in that they are artists who exacerbate language’s inability to directly signify meaning. In the poem “Nudité de la vérité (je le sais bien),” which Lemmy makes Natasha read and whose text the camera actually shows, Éluard acknowledges the existence of ideas that Alpha 60 undoubtedly considers illogical and has condemned, ideas of which Natasha, as an inhabitant of Alphaville knows nothing:

Le désespoir n’a pas d’ailes,

L’amour non plus,

Pas de visage,

⁶ However, the short reference to Céline is problematic given the parallels between his own personal politics and Alpha 60’s totalitarianism.

Ne parlent pas,
 Je ne bouge pas,
 Je ne les regarde pas,
 Je ne leur parle pas

Mais je suis bien aussi vivant que mon amour et que mon désespoir.⁷

The Carné and Shakespeare citations are also appropriate in that *Le jour se lève* and *Hamlet* accentuate the sense of fatality and depression that lurks in the streets of the urban desert that is Alphaville. The documentary aspect of Godard's cinema and his actors' styles may objectify the film, but it also lends a realistic quality to the fantasy. It is filmed in 1960s Paris, with real buildings and real Ford Mustangs (even though Lemmy says it is a Ford Galaxy). The filmmaker maintains those New Wave techniques of location shooting and natural light that contribute to its odd documentary feel, ergo drawing comparisons between Alphaville and 1960s Paris and enabling criticism on a social level. The very first image is a still, a man walking past a giant poster that depicts an angry public pushing a tank—a militant and technocratic means of rule—into a body of water, which is then followed by a vertical pan up to another poster showing two hands releasing a dove into the air, an iconographic picture of liberation.

The characterization of *Alphaville* as a genre film, as film noir, is not exactly accurate either. The tapestry on which Godard embroiders his ideas is made up of both science

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Despair has no wings,
 Nor has love,
 No countenance,
 They do not speak,
 I do not budge,
 I do not behold them,
 I do not speak to them
 But I am just as real as my love and my despair. (Trans: <http://oldpoetry.com/poetry/7935>)

fiction and film noir threads. It is a mixing of genres, a complication that is antithetical to Alpha 60's code of objectification. The inclusion of Éluard, Céline and Shakespeare in a science fiction/film noir creates the postmodern idea of the mixing of high and low cultures, yet again quite in opposition to Alpha 60's agenda. We might, then, better characterize *Alphaville* as what Keith Booker cleverly calls "dystective fiction," a genre that claims Thomas Pynchon, Ridley Scott, William Gibson, Kobu Abé, and Haruki Murakami as examples. The name "dystective" designates a combination of detective fiction and those works concerning a dystopic vision of society, together creating a story in which a detective character is cast in a dystopic setting for the purpose of destabilizing it. Lemmy is a perfect example (192). Booker claims that dystective fiction is an ideologically driven genre on three accounts: first, it becomes transgressive to high/low culture distinctions, as previously discussed; second, it is preoccupied with artistic, social, and political concerns; lastly, dystective fiction mixes established genres in a way that creates a sort of intertextuality (192-93). All the above wholly match *Alphaville* and emphasize the film's rebellious nature to Alpha 60's plans.

A common component of film noir and sometimes of the science fiction film is the use of violence, which is particularly insubordinate to Alpha 60 through its use in *Alphaville*. When Lemmy first arrives, he is greeted at his hotel by the attacks of a few of Alpha 60's henchmen. The violent encounter is laughable for a few reasons. The music accompanying the tussle is similar to lounge music, the absolute opposite of what one might expect to hear during a fight scene. As Lemmy beats a man stupid with a chair we hear nothing but a genre of music that is in general meant to put the listener at ease, complicating the conventions of the crime film that would usually employ bombastic,

harsh big band sounds. During the struggle, the soundtrack intermittently cuts on and off, sometimes completely, causing the spectator once again to recognize the film as a documentary of a fiction film. At the beginning of Lemmy's climactic escape, another fight takes place, this time so that he may steal a man's car. The brawl appears at first to be relayed through a series of still images, yet after closer viewing it becomes apparent that the actors are only standing still, assuming positions all too overused in film noir fight scenes, again alienating the spectator.

Lemmy Caution the character and Eddie Constantine the actor are representative of enlightenment in addition to rebellion, together creating a Promethean figure in the darkness of Alphaville the city and the movie. Eddie Constantine had already been in many film noir works, always taking on the character of Lemmy Caution, but in 1965 he was considered by many to not only be a horrible actor but well past his prime (MacCabe 167). Constantine is, therefore, a figure from the past in the context of his career and in his appearance as well. This constitutes a threat to Alpha 60's everlasting present through Constantine's career and his body. Seconds before Anna Karina enters his hotel room, he uses a gun to "shoot" on a lighter. After she asks him if he has a light, he responds, "Oui, j'ai fait neuf mille kilomètres pour vous en donner."⁸ This scene is an overt incarnation of the Prometheus character, but it is also the first of many to compare Lemmy to another presence in the film that could also be seen as such, Godard himself. He lugs around an old flash camera voyeuristically taking pictures of anything and everything, further strengthening his connection to Godard (Silverman 63). It is not Lemmy alone who liberates the citizens of Alphaville, but Godard who tries to unshackle the citizens of the real Alphaville, Paris, through the cinematic process.

⁸ "Yes, I've traveled 9000 km to give it to you"

One of these citizens is Natasha von Braun, the daughter of the man behind Alpha 60, whose first steps toward freedom can be seen in the second central sequence of the film that takes place during the day and continues through the night in Lemmy's hotel room. It begins as Lemmy enters three doors, behind each lurks Natasha, defying both conventional notions of editing, time and space. This signifies that something is amiss, vocalized when she says that she came despite specific orders not to do so. It is here that she begins to escape Alpha 60's linguistic grasp: Lemmy has her read aloud passages from Éluard's *Capitale de la douleur*, causing her to anxiously recall words that Alpha 60 has condemned, particularly "la conscience." She breaks the rule of never asking "pourquoi," remembers the Outlands through the recitation of clichés about Florence, "Tokyorama," and New York, and finally, in almost a definitive break, recognizes the nature of poetry. Natasha tells Lemmy, "depuis que je vous ai vu... je ne suis plus normale,"⁹—normal of course as it is defined in Alphaville—and begins an abstract speech about love that can only be described as poetry. This is the schism, when she states that she sees more and more "la forme humaine comme un dialogue amoureux"¹⁰ and even quotes a man who was executed by the beauties at the pool for crying at the death of his wife: "Il suffit d'avancer pour vivre, d'aller droit devant soi vers tout ce que l'on aime."¹¹ This poetic liberation, this advancing toward the "light" (i.e. Lemmy) is paired visually with the element of cinematic language most akin to poetry, the montage. It is a ballad of love and liberation through love, an ode before the explosive destruction of Alpha 60.

⁹ "Since I saw you... I'm no longer normal."

¹⁰ "The human structure as a dialogue between lovers"

¹¹ "One need only advance to live, to go straightforward toward all that one loves."

Finally, in one giant disruption of the simplifying codes of Alpha 60 before its destruction, the ending's car chase is shot with alternating negative and positive images. This technique, however, was actually an accident: Godard's long time cinematographer, Raoul Coutard informed him that there was not enough equipment available to shoot the last scenes due to the absence of natural light, and in true Godard fashion he opted to shoot anyway, using negatives in order to make it possible (MacCabe 173). Despite the purely practical reasons for its use, the negative image is a perfect choice to illustrate the final rebellion against Alpha 60. The positive and negative images are, obviously, exact opposites. The black and white of Alpha 60's doctrine and of the film itself are inversed and made to coexist in the same minute of film.

The exact point of salvation for Alphaville, the act that leads to Alpha 60's self-destruction is actually a riddle, one that Lemmy poses to the master computer: "Quelque chose qui ne varie ni le jour ni la nuit [...] le passé représente le futur, qui avance sur une ligne droite, et pourtant, à l'arrivée, qui a bouclé la boucle." The riddle is certainly one of the most perplexing parts of the film—it is no surprise that most critics have only touched on it if treated at all. Yet this may be exactly the point. The solution is something that is consistent, that travels in a straight line, yet that nevertheless always comes full circle. The answer may be the riddle itself, the acknowledgement of the inability to know; however, the true answer, I believe, can be found in what Lemmy says after Alpha 60 vows to solve it: "Si vous le trouvez, vous vous détruirez au même temps, car vous serez mon semblable, mon frère."¹² These last words are without a doubt a reference to Baudelaire's first poem in *Les Fleurs du mal*. "Au lecteur" is a scathing, dark, pessimistic portrait, but above all it is an outline of the contradictions that characterize

¹² "If you find it, you will destroy yourself at the same time, for you will be my likeness, my brother."

human existence, that make someone “human.” To recognize it as a riddle or to solve it, if it can be solved, would humanize Alpha 60 and the paradoxes would conquer its codifying circuits. Lemmy says that the solution is happiness, but happiness is only partially representative of all the answers that combine to create the illogical being that is man. Lemmy’s success comes from Alpha 60’s inability to dehumanize, categorize, simplify, and objectify the riddle whose answer is humanity, a subject that resists tropological prostitution. As a result, the inhabitants of Alphaville can no longer stand on their own two feet without the stabilizing support of the codifying computer.

The realization that destroys Alpha 60 is also the revelation that ultimately saves Natasha. Her last statement, “je vous aime,” at which she arrives not without some difficulty, is cathartic because it re-humanizes her through the capacity to utter the unclassifiable—in a sense it is a performative. The acceptance of the complications of language and human existence signified by her statement is her emancipation and the death of Alphaville.

*

The New Wave is often interpreted as a masculine movement. Films of this period feature female characters that are seldom anything other than objects of desire for male characters. They are caught between two men, relentlessly pursued by men, or trapped in a distinctly feminine dilemma. Nana in *Vivre sa vie* (1962), Juliette in *Deux ou trois choses...*, and Angela in *Une femme est une femme* (1961) are all involved in particularly feminine dilemmas: Nana and Juliette are forced into prostitution, and Angela is desperate to be impregnated by her unwilling boyfriend. Angela is also caught between two men as is Patricia in *A bout de souffle* (1960) and Camille in *Le mépris* (1963). All of

the women in Godard's New Wave period are objects dominated by men, examples of the prostitution metaphor. The only possible exception is Patricia in *A bout de souffle* who, although treated as object, actually transcends masculine domination by betraying Michel, but even she is finally castigated by the detective for her treachery. Although often decried as sexist, Godard, as we have discussed, consistently places women in similar positions in order to draw attention to what he believes is a social problem: that in society, women are actually forced into these situations.

Breillat is quite the opposite, rejecting the very placement of women in demeaning conditions as sexist in itself. In her films, women are always the active subjects who pursue men or undermine their authority in a fashion that renders them relatively independent. Her reply to New Wave phallocentrism is evident in her representation of the real and, similar to Godard, the criticism of social reality that is enabled through the filmmaking process. The prostitution metaphor is, in Breillat, narrowed down to the restrictions on feminine sexuality, and the social force behind this objectification limited to traditional male-dominated heterosexual codes (henceforth referred to as the "masculine order"). It is this interest that serves as the basis for all of her films, and one that has two major components.

First, it is necessary to modify the above statement concerning the "representation of the real." Although a particular social ill is her focus, the films themselves are more accurately described as a representation of an attitude toward the reality of the social dilemma, a narrative voice. In Godard, reality is found through an attempt to lay bare the cinematic device; indeed, as the camera captures the real it changes and becomes part of it. In Breillat, however, the camera is not the primary ingredient. It is instead her

surrogate narrative voice: “La manière dont on porte un regard fait plus que changer les choses : il la crée” (qtd. in Spoiden 105).¹³ The presence of the director is extended to encompass the point of view of her central characters. Breillat pervades her films so that the subject is not the real and the social conflict associated with it but her attitudes toward the conflict that is then associated with the real. Reality in her films is informed by the director, not the camera.

In *Romance*, we need only point to the use of voice over to reinforce the dominance of perspective, but once again it should not be mistaken for the actor or character’s point of view. In speaking of a Godard film, we can never say that a character’s point of view is that of the director because such a connection is undermined by a self-conscious acting style. Breillat, on the other hand, states: “Ce que je poursuis dans mes films, c’est le moment où le regard d’une *actrice* se voile” (Breillat 14).¹⁴ Even though the points of view of her central characters are essential to her films, the actress remains synonymous with the role she is playing. The actress’ narrative authority does not exist, leaving intact the fictionality of the film; therefore, the film is solely the vision of the director—an extreme version of auteurism. Her characters become her stand-ins and even tend to resemble their creator in that they are often pale, have dark hair, are women of the sixties (the decade in which Breillat came of age), and are, as Claire Clouzot puts it, “obscène et séraphique,” a description befitting of both the cineaste and her cinema (8).

Because it is Breillat who informs the real and permeates her characters’ points of view and not the camera, her cinema is rarely ever meta-cinematic. This is especially true when it comes to the use of objectification as a device. Metaphorical prostitution is not to

¹³ “The manner in which one conducts a look does more than change a context: it creates it.”

¹⁴ “What I work for in my films is the moment when the look of an actress disappears”

be overcome by an ironic objectification of the film itself as in Godard; the metaphor is instead to be exploited in its original state, preserved in a way, so that the central character can overcome the social ills that it produces. The differing uses of objectification in Godard's films and Breillat's films explain their distinct attitudes toward the prostitution metaphor. Despite Godard's seemingly hard lined approach to social objectification, his preoccupation with the image renders his criticism of the social relatively passive. Breillat's cinema is instead primarily concerned with her narrative authority and not mitigated by the image, making her films far more forceful. Her films may even be called, especially in the case of *Romance*, manifestoes. Both *Alphaville* and *Romance* are discussions of tropological prostitution, but only *Romance* is hostile to the discourse.

*

Romance opens, like *Alphaville*, with a subversive image: Paul, a male model, is having make-up applied in close-up. Traditional divisions of gender are confounded; instead of a woman, the usual object of fashion and film, a man is made to be an object before the camera. The following two shots show Marie in the foreground with her back to the camera voyeuristically watching her boyfriend prepare for a photo shoot, reversing the male gaze and causing the spectator to identify with Marie. Indeed, it appears as if Breillat is mocking the masculine order. During the shoot, the photographer, off-screen, directs the female model to be submissive to Paul, to lower her regard, seemingly dictating gender roles; however, he then tells Paul to stand on his toes so that he may look dominant, subtly undermining traditional heterosexual codes.

The opening sequence would have the spectator believe that Marie has already succeeded in overcoming masculine domination, yet the following scene reconstructs the codes that the opening destabilizes. Paul and Marie sit at a table smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, and the tense atmosphere suggests that, this time, the photographers dictum is portrayed in earnest: Paul is stone-faced, and Marie stares at the ground with tears streaming from her eyes. Their conversation focuses on a recent problem in their relationship: Paul no longer feels any desire to make love to her. Deeply affected, the idea of sleeping with other people is brought up, but it repulses Marie. The spectator realizes that Marie has not yet transcended anything and that she adheres to common heterosexual practices to the extent that she feels dishonored by her lover. As she confesses: “Pour moi, un homme qui est incapable de m’aimer physiquement, c’est un peu de malheur, un gouffre de souffrance. On dit d’un homme qui baise une femme qu’il l’honore [...] Paul me déshonore.”¹⁵ David Vasse contends that there are two distinct types of women in Breillat’s cinema: those that believe a woman should not limit themselves to one man, the liberated, and those that do limit themselves to one man and suffer as a result. He further argues that the idea of love in Breillat is consistently portrayed as a convention that empowers men. Men do not love a woman because of that particular woman’s uniqueness, but rather that they “project their desire” onto any woman that fits the image of the woman they desire (36). It is a match between an objectified image and the actual woman who is objectified to resemble that image. Marie, because she gives herself over to this notion of love, suffers due to Paul’s lack of desire for her, feeling shamed at not being made an object.

¹⁵ “To me, a man who is incapable of physically loving me is a unfortunate, an abyss of suffering. They say that a man who screws a woman honors her [...] Paul does me a disgrace.”

Marie's inability to recognize the structure of love leads her to assume the role of aggressor, to reverse gender roles, as a first attempt at reconciling their relationship's sexual dilemma. At Paul's apartment, her attempts to rekindle his desire for her fail miserably because she is ignorant as to how to initiate intercourse. She begs him to remove his shirt in a manner that can only be described as pathetic. She then proceeds to stimulate him manually, then orally, suggesting that she may in fact understand heterosexual relationships better than she lets on, for in pornography, the only sexual prelude of which a woman is capable is fellatio. Unfortunately for her, she is not successful because Paul is just as uninterested as he was at the beginning of the scene.

Paul's apartment, acting as his extension, visually resists Marie's sexuality in favor of promoting her despair. The stark, monastic space exudes a sterile atmosphere. His inability to feel any desire for Marie leaves both him and the décor passive and detached (Spoiden 102). The sparseness of his apartment and the inundation of white emphasize the absence of his virility as well as represent the nature of Marie's maelstrom. As Vasse puts it: "A l'intérieur de ce blanc figé dans la glace sommeillent les démons de Marie, son inconscient qu'elle désire brûler par les feux d'une passion qu'elle souhaite vivre avec Paul. Mais en vain" (174).¹⁶ Marie is then forced to leave the apartment in order to seek out the love that Paul denies her.

A common contention among critics of *Romance* is that Rocco Siffredi's character, Paolo, is the exact opposite of Paul. Not only is Paolo played by a virile superstar of pornographic cinema, but the dark, brooding environment in which he and Marie have sex is juxtaposed to Paul's impersonal living space. The connection between the two is

¹⁶ "Inside this frozen white doze Marie's demons, her unconscious that she wants to burn by the fires of a passion that she would like to share with Paul. But in vain"

further enforced due to their physical statures: Paul's build and penis are noticeably smaller than Paolo's. In terms of their sexual drive, Paolo expresses the yearning that Paul severely lacks.

Yet, despite their differences, the two have just as much in common, rendering Paolo more of a transitional figure than an opposite. Within the first minute of meeting Marie, Paolo admits that his sexual desire is simply a product of a prolonged period of celibacy. During the sexual act, he holds Marie down by her arms and penetrates her from behind, using her as a sexual outlet, but the discussion that leads to the act draws attention to his obvious mental inferiority in relation to Marie—while she ponders the various abstract meanings of a condom, he can only complain about having to wear one. He is transitional because for Marie he is an opportunity for inchoate intellection on heterosexual relationships and not for transfiguration.

The proper opposite of Paul is Robert, the principal of the primary school at which Marie teaches. Whereas Paul's (and Paolo's) wardrobe are limited to shades of clinical white and tan, Robert only sports lustrous red and domineering black. His apartment is also an extension of himself: the walls are black, the curtains and furniture red, and various objects decorate every corner of his living room. He is clearly the "anti-Paul" and his apartment is the "incarnation du charnel" (Clouzot 82).

Though Robert may not be "particulièrement beau," he is the most virile of all male characters in *Romance*, his success largely due to his ability to mimic the image of masculinity that women desire, to recreate heterosexual codes. Acting as Marie's guide he recites trite assumptions about women: that they should read to men, that childbirth

purifies the whore. Robert enforces gender roles, re-instructing Marie of rules so basic that that they can only be seen as constructs.

Similar to the use of language in *Alphaville*, codes of heterosexual conduct create meaning and reality. In truth, they are a type of sexual language. In Breillat, these fundamentals of sexuality must be common to each individual for sex is the joining of two individuals. The elements of language that Robert teaches Marie are then the codes of the masculine order, the constructs by which a person attracts, seduces, and makes love to another. The means through which Robert chooses to introduce Marie to this language is the bondage ritual. It is through this objectifying practice that he crushes her naïvety and exposes her to her status as a woman living under the dominance of the masculine order.

Bondage represents a few things in *Romance*. Because no penetration occurs, the participant is limited to psychological stimulation, and the climax is purely of the mind and not the body. The bondage ritual is also the physical objectification of an individual. Marie is made to be plastic, motionless, and incapable of any physical interaction. By surrendering her free will to Robert, she becomes his malleable object. It is thus, as an object that is only capable of mental functions, that Marie is forced to realize her predicament.

In Robert's bedroom, Marie and her white dress are flanked by red curtains, suggesting the pending destruction of her innocence as she surrenders herself for the first time, knowingly, to the masculine order. He wraps a rope tightly around her body and her sex, signifying the limitations on her sexuality. He then places a high-backed chair behind her and a ball-gag in her mouth so that any movement or speech is impossible.

The camera remains fixed, in close-up, for an entire minute on her face. The spectator witnesses the gradual crumbling of her mental state until she reaches a lachrymose catharsis and, being released, collapses into Robert's arms. It is through this first bondage ritual at Robert's apartment that Marie gradually becomes aware of the nature of her relationship with Paul and of her status as an objectified woman under the masculine order. Yet this is only the beginning.

The spectator realizes the incomplete transformation in Marie shortly following the white dress ritual, when she is taken advantage of by an anonymous man and raped. Similar to the film's opening, the sequence begins with the reversal of the male gaze—Marie spies on Paul from a window outside the Japanese restaurant. We are led to believe that it is a genuine symbol of her mental reconfiguration, and again we are deceived. Returning to Paul's apartment, Marie is propositioned by a man who wants to perform cunnilingus on her. Believing that she possesses the strength to be objectified and that she now understands what it is to be objectified, she accepts. When the act of prostitution goes awry and the john forcefully takes her from behind, her self-confidence is dashed. As the man zips up and walks away, she tries unsuccessfully to dissimulate her despair, screaming obscenities through tears that betray her self-assurance. The first bondage sequence did introduce her to a liberating conception of sexuality, but her failure in applying the lesson shows that her manumission is not yet fully realized.

The tone of the second bondage ritual, the red dress sequence, is considerably more casual than the first, signifying that Marie has by now made some progress. While tying her arms behind her back Robert recounts an amusing tale of a sexual encounter with Grace Delly (assumably a fictional Grace Kelly) during which he did not realize it was

her. He vocalizes his disappointment at not being able to find a second shackle after having dug rope after handcuff after chain out of his toy chest. Like a child, he is annoyed when Marie shifts the slightest bit, and when almost finished he declares anticlimactically “Ah, voilà, c’est très beau!” as if he just finished building a perfect sand castle. In an interview with Robert Sklar, Breillat admits that the red dress scene caused people on the set to laugh uncontrollably, and this is precisely the effect she intended. It demonstrates that Robert and Marie have been through this many times since the white dress sequence (Sklar 25).

Before the end of the ritual, Robert cuts a slit in Marie’s panties to feel if she is aroused. With the least bit of physical contact and without any penetration, his moist fingers indicate that she is. Marie has by this time learned to effectively and deliberately assume the role of an objectified woman. She wears her hair down, and her dress is practically falling off—a conventional image of feminine sexuality. In contrast to the rigid pose against the high-backed chair in the bedroom during the white dress sequence, she sits gracefully on a platform in the living room. She is lissome and comfortable as she stretches out her legs and leans to one side. She is not just aware of her status as an object for men’s desire but accustomed to it.

A major component in her development is the acceptance of the masculine order. Through Marie’s willing participation in bondage rituals, she reflects Agnès Varda’s claim that the first feminist action is not simply to accept the male gaze but to accept and return that gaze (Gillian 205). Marie allows herself to be rendered an object, yet an object that is no longer passive nor unawares can no longer be defined as an object. She is a

subject posing as an object. Indeed for Marie, self-objectification is a device to attain the status of covert object. As David Vasse elucidates the concept:

Les héroïnes de Breillat, se sachant regardées et désirées, convertissent de mieux qu'elles peuvent cet état de passivité que leur impose le regard masculin en une force de consentement pratique, à destination de leur propre faculté à circonscrire physiquement la nature même de leur désir. [...] Pour Breillat, la femme se sait captive des manigances machiste de l'homme et, forte de ce savoir, laisse advenir le moment où l'homme vacillera sous l'effet persistant et redoutable de cette trop grande lucidité (26-27).¹⁷

Romance does not offer the solution of defeating objectification in the sense that one may dispose of it entirely. It should instead be exploited. If a woman knowingly allows herself or intentionally seeks to be objectified, she alters the hold on her sexuality. Objectification, then, does not manipulate feminine sexuality; it is rather the sexuality of the woman that manipulates objectification in order turn an object into a subject. Marie, through numerous bondage rituals, learns the codes of heterosexual relationships so that she can overcome not objectification itself but the oppressive states of existence that it is capable of producing. In Marie's own words: "J'suis jamais ivre, ou ce qui s'appelle ivre."¹⁸

¹⁷ "Breillat's heroines, knowing that they are watched and desired, convert as much as possible this passive state, which the male gaze imposes on them through practical consent, into their own ability to physically circumscribe the very nature of their desire. [...] For Breillat, women know themselves to be captive of male-chauvinist scheming and, strengthened of this knowledge, wait for the moment when men fail under the persistent and formidable force of this great lucidity."

¹⁸ "I never get drunk, or at least what they call 'drunk.'"

The final step in her emancipation is the result of the final sex scene with Paul, indeed the only sex scene with Paul. After having dinner with Robert, Marie returns to the cold apartment, her glowing, red dress invading the lifeless space. Crawling into bed, she successfully assumes the role of the desired woman, that is to say, of the objectified woman. Paul invites her to caress him, but Marie only lifts her arms above her head and clenches her fists in a fashion comparable to offering her hands to be tied. The exploitation of gender roles allows her to achieve what she has been working for the entire film—sex with Paul. Yet despite her skillful manipulation of heterosexual codes, after mounting Paul she says: “Toi, tu prends ma place. T’es la femme; moi, j’suis ton mec, J’t’baise.”¹⁹ Marie, in one last false step, returns to the failed technique of overtly switching gender roles and is thrown off the bed in disgust—but not without first being impregnated.

Marie’s dystopic fantasy during the gynecological examination is a visual translation of the notion that transcending objectification is not an option; a woman can only willfully and knowingly take part in order to palliate its effects. In her fantasy, her mind/head is separated from her body/sex by a guillotine-like structure built into a wall. At one side of the wall, in a dark and smoky room, numerous, anonymous men use her body. At the other side, she is kept company in a sterile, white room by the man she supposedly loves. *Romance*’s cinematographer, Yorgos Arvanitis, designed this “fantasme des hardeurs” after the orgiastic iconography sometimes found on ancient Greek vases. He characterizes the stifling atmosphere of the fantasy in terms of sexual objectification: “Elle est comme l’enfer où ces hommes cherchent des sexes des femmes qui sont comme des trous... Et là aussi, je ne voulais pas que quoi que ce soit soit caché.

¹⁹ “You, you take my place. You’re the woman; I, I’m your man. I’ll screw you.”

Ce qui est caché n'est pas bon" (qtd. in Clouzot 87).²⁰ It is a disturbing image of her present status, one that allows her to give her body over to other men in order to gain the admiration of her lover. It is a translation riddled with contradictions, all of which indicate one remaining problem: Marie is still dependant on Paul.

Her persistent reliance on Paul, this final impasse to attaining a new life, is at once solved and decimated in the final minutes of the film. Indeed, Marie finds a solution in the act of murder. During the drive home after a night at the club, Paul begins to spout axioms about heterosexual relationships, primarily dealing with the assumption that a man is not attracted to a woman who is always available. It is remarkably similar to the clichés Robert teaches her at the beginning of the first bondage sequence, yet, here, the context behind them is completely different. Robert's guidance during the white dress scene is an introduction, a rundown of particular concepts that Marie learns to exploit so that she can be independent from them. Similar maxims, in which Paul sincerely believes, now only provoke her contempt. Paul disgusts her, and before leaving for the hospital the next morning she designs his death by putting out the pilot light of the oven and turning on the gas.

The single most important shot of the film is the split second juxtaposition of the birth of Marie's child and the explosion of Paul's apartment. The graphic close-up of Marie's sex as she delivers her baby is the perfect visual accompaniment for her final act of defiance against the masculine order. Similar close-ups of a vagina would immediately suggest pornography, the sexualization of the female anatomy; however, the emergence of the child's head from the womb prevents any such association. It is an image that is

²⁰ "It is like hell where these men look for women's genitals that are like holes... and there too, I didn't want anything to be hidden. What is hidden is not good."

hostile to its own conventional signification. The cry of the newborn baby is immediately followed by Paul's death for through childbirth, Marie kills her former self and gives life to a new identity. The end of Breillat's film marks the central character's entry "dans le monde des êtres libres, du moins émancipés, et ce malgré les stigmatismes laissés par l'aventure" (Vasse 175).²¹

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Catherine Breillat is known to embrace contradictory elements in her films: "There are things that can't be quantified mentally; yet they can exist and be juxtaposed. Cinema allows you to film these contradictions" (qtd. in Sklar 26). *Romance* contains two of these counteractive elements, and it is certainly hard to rationally reconcile them with the film as a whole, especially as *Romance* has the air of a polemic.

Returning briefly to the above Vasse quote concerning the birth/death scene at the end, we notice that he indirectly glosses over a discrepancy in the film's conclusion, one of these "stigmatismes laissés par l'aventure." As the child emerges from Marie's womb, the spectator is informed by an off-screen voice that the baby is a boy. We could interpret this as a symbolic purging of the masculine order from Marie's body, but that seems to be far too strained because the rest of her life is now devoted to rearing her son. The ending raises many more questions than it answers.

Given Marie's triumph over the effects of objectification through her mental transformation—the division between mind and body highlighted in her dystopic fantasy—the genre bending use of pornographic techniques in *Romance* is problematic. Pornography is characterized by an exclusive focus on the body relayed cinematically by fragmented close-ups (Vasse 91). Breillat confuses the boundary between this type of

²¹ "into the world of liberated beings, at least emancipated, and despite the stigmas left by the adventure."

cinema and more cerebral art house cinema. The sex scene between Paolo and Marie at once emphasizes the body—the presence of Rocco Siffredi—as well as the mind—Marie’s intellectual ponderings—all the while filming the act in its entirety through an eight minute sequence shot. Conversely, the bondage scenes between Marie and Robert that focus primarily on her mental processes are characterized by close-ups of her sex and relatively frequent fragmentation. The cinematic aspects of the film are often in conflict with the narrative. The division between mind and body that characterizes Marie’s development is undermined by the way in which Breillat fuses these two opposites during the sex scenes. They have an overtly cerebral tone, yet that tone is accompanied by a relatively carnal portrayal, thus creating a meta-cinematic struggle that is never fully resolved.

In the context of Godard’s early career as a whole, contradiction can also be found in *Alphaville*. In truth, we have already touched upon the nature of this dispute in our discussion of New Wave phallocentrism. *Alphaville* criticizes a society that forces its citizens to “prostitute” themselves, to reify themselves in order to operate in that society. The film is also representative of Godard’s collective work due to a particular acting style that consistently refers to the presence of the camera and to the acting performance itself. This last aspect undermines the first for in Godard’s films, Anna Karina often assumes conventional New Wave roles that objectify women. She is always either the object of men’s desire or placed in specifically feminine dilemmas, and never triumphant. Even in those few Godard films of the 1960s that do not feature his former wife, *Une femme mariée* and *Le mépris*, Karina’s ghost lurks behind each door—she was originally meant to play M ril’s role in the first film, and in the first half of the second, Bardot sports the

very same wig worn by Karina in *Vivre sa vie* (MacCabe 165, 162). Karina falls victim to the very same circumstances that her roles attempt to criticize, and although Godard may pass judgment on social objectification, the responsibility for Karina's portrayal from film to film falls squarely on his shoulders.

The uneven use of objectification in *Alphaville* through Anna Karina gives rise to yet another, more fundamental problem in Godard's work. In *Masculin féminin*, Paul, while in a movie theater, states in voiceover:

On allait souvent au cinéma. L'écran s'éclairait, et on frémissait. Nos corps plus souvent aussi, Madeleine et moi, on était déçu. Les images dataient et sautaient, et Marilyn Monroe avait terriblement vieilli. On était triste. Ce n'était pas le film dont nous avions rêvé. Ce n'était pas ce film total que chacun parmi nous portait en soi, ce film qu'on aurait voulu faire, ou, plus secrètement sans doute, que nous aurions voulu vivre.²²

This lengthy yet monumentally important quote refers to what is perhaps the largest fault Godard makes in his self-proclaimed critical cinema. It is not groundbreaking to call him a cinéophile, but it may be more edifying to characterize him as one who is infatuated with the image as both a spectator and a director. Thus, the above passage can be extended to incorporate Godard himself, to describe his own sublime connection with film and intimate relationship with what it is capable of representing—including images of feminine sexuality. Love of the cinematic image is, of course, only half of his motivation behind making films. The other half, as we have discussed, is the desire to criticize

²² We went to the cinema often. The screen would light up, and we would quiver. Our bodies more often as well, Madeleine and I, we were deceived. The images were dated and jumpy, and Marilyn Monroe had aged terribly. We were sad. It wasn't the film we had dreamt of. It wasn't this total film that each one of us carried inside ourselves, this film we would have wanted to make, this film we would have wanted to live.

through the filmmaking process; however, this second impetus is inimical to the first. How is one to criticize cinema and the various objects it can represent if one cannot distance oneself from that very medium?

Breillat, despite whatever problems may exist in her own cinema, cannot be said to take the same false step. She is, to reiterate the point, hostile to the process; no one is going to call her a cinéphile. She retains that distance between herself and the subject of her films that is essential to effective criticism, and it is this difference between her and Godard that could be taken as the most important development from the New Wave to more contemporary French film, a change that is, possibly, evident in Godard's own more recent films. We might say, on some accounts, that his later films are reflections on his own spectatorship and how it relates to the filmmaking. As he roughly quotes and answers Borges' question in the very last minutes of his epic, self-defining *Histoire(s) du cinema*:

Si un homme traversait le paradis en songe, et il reçût une fleur comme preuve de son passage, et qu'à son réveil, il trouvât cette fleur dans ces mains, que dire alors ? J'étais cet homme.²³

Whereas these inconsistencies may affect the readings of each film and perhaps the interpretation of the directors' collective works, they do not change the fact that there is undeniably an observable continuum, an evolution of New Wave preoccupations, techniques, and subjects from Godard's early work to the contemporary work of Breillat. Both are deeply interested in what we have called the "prostitution metaphor" but in significantly different ways. Whereas Godard rails against the social objectification of the

²³ If a man crosses paradise in a dream, and he receives a flower as proof of his passage, and upon waking, he finds this flower in his hands, what then? I was this man.

individual, Breillat concentrates on the objectified state of feminine sexuality, embraces it as it functions in the male-dominated world, and finally uses it to women's own advantage to stop its negative effects before they even occur. The key connection, though, is that both filmmakers share the position that tropological prostitution is crucially related to language. It allows us to make sense of experience and also to structure that experience, to understand and to behave. Language is, then, present in all aspects of life, from our jobs and sexuality to the films we see off the clock and out of the bedroom and is even present in the very way we experience the cinema. It is thus capable of influencing or directly leading to objectification's ill effects such as reification or sexualization, but the objectification of these same forms of language can just as easily combat these effects, be it through narrative, cinematic, or meta-cinematic devices. Through being aware of the power that language has in even our quotidian lives, we discover the ways in which it operates, the ways in which it can be controlled, and how it can then be used not to our detriment but to our benefit as educated components of a modern society.

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